

Why there is a need to reframe the discourse on armed groups in Mali: requirements for successful disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

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Why there is a need to reframe the discourse on armed groups in Mali

Requirements for successful disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

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Policy recommendations

\ Get agreement on integration modalities before advancing with global DDR in Mali

There is an urgent requirement to endorse the Presidential decree on the modalities of the allocation of ranks, command functions, and the reclassification of ex-combatants of signatory movements in the relevant structures established by the state, including the army and security forces. If first tranches of ex-combatants are not successfully (re-)deployed, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the government need to halt and reconsider the pilot process.

\ Progress in security sector reform is a prerequisite for DDR

DDR has to be more closely tied to progress in reforming the Malian security sector. Distrust in the state and its failure to provide protection have been quoted as one of the main drivers of armed conflict in Mali. Integrating more individuals into a force that lacks accountability and oversight mechanisms might indeed worsen the problem rather than solving it. International assistance to the DDR process should be conditioned upon government efforts to enhance the capacity of the military justice system and the strengthening of the oversight role of civil society and parliament.

\ Reframe the discourse on non-state armed groups

The discourse on Mali, which is currently driven by counter-terrorist rhetoric, needs to be reframed. It has to shift from fighting terrorism to broader multi-dimensional peacebuilding. Stabilisation policy in Mali needs to avoid a too narrow programmatic focus on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). International stabilisation actors, the Malian government and civil society need to develop and strengthen programmes and tools addressing the root causes that drive non-state armed groups to use violence.

\ Address root causes of the conflict and respond to grievances non-state actors have

Taking a broader perspective in dealing with non-state armed actors in Mali requires a better analysis of the grievances these actors have. The government, supported by the international community, needs to work on strategies that acknowledge and better respond to these grievances rather than primarily focusing on 'defeating terrorists' through military security approaches. International assistance to other policy areas must be conditioned upon political will on the side of the Malian government to address the root causes of the conflict.

Why there is a need to reframe the discourse on armed groups in Mali

The Algiers Peace Agreement concluded in 2015 constitutes the framework for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process in Mali. Up to now, there has been some progress in implementing DDR-relevant provisions of the peace accord.

In terms of achievements, a National DDR Commission (Commission Nationale de DDR, CNDDR) and Integration Commission have been established. The CNDDR is meant to work closely with the Ministry of Reconciliation and Peace and the Comité de Suivi de l'accord (CSA) that has been put in place to oversee the implementation of the peace accord. Its sub-committee on Defence and Security (SCDS) works on the recommendations of the Comité technique de sécurité (CTS), which amongst others observes the ceasefire agreement and supports the integration process of ex-combatants. The Integration Commission in coordination with the CNDDR has worked out eligibility criteria for the DDR process. These are complemented by a reinsertion strategy which has been developed by the CNDDR in close conjunction with the World Bank.

In addition to the setup of these institutions and the work on strategic aspects of the future DDR programme, eight cantonment sites were fully constructed with the help of the MINUSMA assessed budget and Peace Building Support Office. While some of the sites are currently guarded by signatory armed groups, these have never been utilised for DDR purposes, given pending DDR operations.

This also means that the Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC, Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination)¹, which is composed of members of signatory armed movements and the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), has never fulfilled one of its original purposes:

the provision of security to the cantonment sites during the DDR process as envisaged by the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. Since the wider DDR process has not started yet, the MOC battalions could not be deployed to the cantonment sites. Their task was, therefore, limited to conducting joint patrols around the MOC camps as a confidence-building measure.

Even though several key requirements for DDR are in place (institutional framework, key guiding documents and cantonment sites to assemble the forces), the DDR process is years behind schedule. While the peace agreement stipulated the establishment of a start date for the cantonment process within 30 days of signing the agreement, it is currently not clear when or if the cantonment sites will ever be used and further stages of DDR will be implemented including the reinsertion of former fighters into civilian life. The registration process, which under the March 2018 road map was scheduled to close in April 2018 was still ongoing by April 2019. At that time, 63,000 eligible candidates had been announced by the CNDDR (Carter Center, 2019). A comprehensive and binding timetable to process this elevated number of combatants does not seem to be in place at the given moment.

The main reason for the delay in starting the wider DDR process is connected to the lack of political commitment and the erosion of trust between the signatory parties of the peace agreement. According to the Carter Center as the Independent Observer of the implementation of the agreement, "the increasing confidence established between the Malian parties since early 2018 is now dwindling. The erosion of trust has contributed to the continuation of the longstanding problem of the parties' lack of follow-through on commitments" (Carter Center, 2019). This also applies to commitments that were made in relation to the DDR and the security sector reform (SSR) process.

1 \ After an agreement between the parties in July 2016 on the conditions of implementation and deployment of the MOC in the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, the first MOC was established in January 2017 in Gao. The MOCs in Timbuktu and Kidal were finally established in May 2018 (Savey & Boisvert, 2019).

Although the Malian army and security forces are probably in a better state today than before the 2012 crisis due to capacity-building efforts by a range of stakeholders such as the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), European Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP), France, the United States and MINUSMA, its human rights records remain poor. According to reports of human rights organisations, the Malian army has been accused of numerous violations of human rights and international humanitarian law including enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings, torture and arbitrary arrest, particularly in the course of its counter-terrorist operations in northern Mali.

Meanwhile, the backdoor for the signatory armed groups to resort to violence still seems to be open. For example, the fact that neither the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) nor the Platform (pro-government platform of armed militias) contributed heavy weapons to the MOC battalions—as previously agreed upon in the context of the agreement on the modalities of the deployment and operationalisation of the MOC—is an indicator for this. Claims that heavy weapons in Mali are not in circulation are rather unrealistic given their inflow into Mali after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the return of Tuareg soldiers who had been in his employ (Conflict Armament Research & Small Arms Survey, 2013; Larémont, 2013; Conflict Armament Research, 2016).

Mali's 'accelerated' DDR/Integration programme

Due to the political challenges in starting the wider DDR process, but also faced with mounting tensions in the country, rising insecurity associated with the continuing terrorist threat and an urgent need to disarm and demobilise ex-combatants in the north, the CNDDR with the support of MINUSMA launched a DDR pilot process, called ADDR-I (Accelerated disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration/integration) in November 2018. This is a fast track integration process that intends to train combatants from the MOC and to eventually redeploy them into the

reconstituted Malian defence and security forces, the overall target being the integration of 4,900 individuals, including 900 persons who deserted from the Malian Armed Forces in 2012.

As to its disarmament component, the programme follows a “one man, one weapon” policy, which implies the mandatory handover of one or more weapons upon registration of each ex-combatant.

While the peace agreement stipulates the integration of demobilised combatants into the MDSF or long-term socio-economic reinsertion into civilian life, the accelerated DDR/I process only foresees the option of integrating the beneficiaries into the armed forces. Those ex-combatants who were assessed medically unfit during registration for the ADDR-I pilot programme are meant to await the launch of the socio-economic reinsertion programme by the CNDDR.

Particularly when travelling outside of Bamako, the information the signatory movements have about the larger DDR programme appears to be limited. Members of the MOC coordination office in Gao at least indicated that they had little information about the process envisioned for those individuals who are to be reintegrated into civilian life. This lack of information on the ‘local level’ may be connected to the fact that in Mali there is—like in many other post-conflict settings—a certain mismatch between the political leadership in the capital that is taking decisions and the military leadership on the regional and local level.

The flow of information on the DDR process between the national and local level is aggravated even further by the lack of presence of the National DDR Commission in these areas. Although the CNDDR maintains field offices and is meant to maintain a permanent presence in the regions, its reach beyond Bamako seems to be limited. This implies that other key actors working on DDR matters, like MINUSMA, at times do not have a national counterpart on the local level with whom challenges can be discussed and solutions found.

After demobilisation, those ex-combatants who were screened and assessed medically fit in the accelerated programme receive a six-week basic military training at the various training centres in Tiby, Banokoro, Mapho and Markala in Segou region and Koulikoro in Koulikoro region. As of 2 September 2019, a total of 1,006 out of 1,840 ex-combatants have completed the basic training and integrated into MDSF (more ex-combatants are currently being trained, others are expected to take part in a last catch-up phase). Once redeployed, they will be required to undertake a six-week specialised training in their various units.

Although a plan (2019-2021) for progressive redeployment² of MOC ex-combatants has been drafted by MINUSMA along with the Malian Armed Forces, following a request from the Malian Chief of General Staff, it remains to be seen whether the demobilised individuals will indeed have key functions and be redeployed as full members of the MDSF.

For the newly integrated units it is going to be important that these will have constructive tasks. A lack of 'real' engagement bears the risks that crime rates increase in those areas where former MOC members are deployed. At least in Gao and the surrounding areas, the rise in crime (e.g. cars and arms theft) has been a major problem since the MOC process started.

Apart from the question of how integrated ex-combatants will be used, there is little clarity regarding the ceiling for integration. Up to the time of writing, the final quota of fighters to be integrated through the DDR process, which has to be decided by the subcommittee on defence and security, is contested. While the Malian military in the past propagated for a ceiling of around 5,000 individuals, the signatory groups aimed at a much higher figure (around 10,000). A compromise which the CNDDR, too, is likely to support might eventually be found somewhere

in-between. This insecurity about quotas is risky and may even be harmful to the DDR process, as ex-combatants may be trained, redeployed to the north, only to find their status challenged in the face of new discussions over quotas.

Due to these challenges, it will be all the more crucial to carefully assess the outcome of the accelerated DDR/I programme before advancing with the global DDR process in Mali.

If first tranches of ex-combatants are not successfully integrated and (re-)deployed, the current DDR process needs to be halted and reconsidered. It is, therefore, urgently required to endorse the decree on the modalities of the allocation of ranks, command functions and the reclassification of ex-combatants of signatory movements in the relevant structures established by the state, including the army and security forces. The decree was adopted by the Council of Ministers on 9 October 2019 and is awaiting endorsement by the President. Even more importantly, the actors responsible for implementing the decree and associated action plan must also act upon it. This may sound self-evident, but in a country where the government is highly contested, it is not at all certain that its decisions will indeed be accepted by all military levels and translated into action. The endorsement and implementation of the decree and action plan should be condition for any further capacity-building assistance to the MDSF and international financial support to processing further tranches of ex-combatants in the context of the accelerated DDR/I programme as well as the wider DDR process.

² \ The draft document adopted by the Malian Armed Forces was reviewed and approved by the 41st CTS meeting on 25 September 2019. This document is awaiting final adoption by the Sub Committee on Defense and Security of the CSA before implementation.

The need to 'accelerate' the security sector reform process

Even if the decree mentioned above is endorsed, the long-term prospects for those who have undergone training in the context of the accelerated DDR/I programme are still unclear given the absence of progress towards the creation and deployment of the reconstituted force. According to the assessment of conflict analysts in Bamako, the hesitation to move towards a reconstituted force is connected to concerns within the government and the military that the process of building a reconstituted army may spark off another crisis. Eligible armed groups also do not seem necessarily keen for the integration process to be concluded as their bargaining power will be reduced once their members have been integrated.

Such concerns and internal resistance stand in the way of promoting a coordinated security sector reform (SSR) process in Mali, which needs to be 'accelerated' to catch up with the pilot DDR process already underway. Currently, it is essential to achieve progress on the reorganisation of the MDSF and to implement the National Security Sector Reform Strategy which has been adopted.

Up to today, Malians have seen very limited results in the field of security sector reform. As in many other areas, the government in the past has given priority to capacity-building measures over structural reforms. Like in the field of DDR, primarily formal technical measures have been taken, such as the formation of a National Council for the Reform of the Security Sector. But the political will to back these institutions needs to be in place for them to be effective. Overall, the government has shown limited interest in substantive reforms aimed at professionalising the security sector (Tull, 2017). The capacity-building measures that were targeted at the state security forces did not prevent human rights abuses by the Malian Armed Forces against the civilian population. In fact, "the number of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by state security forces in the context of counterterrorism operations increased significantly in 2018" (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Enhancing democratic control and accountability of Mali's security sector is one of the most important steps that will need to be taken. The violations of the state security forces against the Malian citizens are undermining the trust the average citizen still has in its state and its security organs. Distrust in the state and its failure to provide protection has been quoted as one of the main drivers of armed conflict in Mali. Integrating more individuals into a force that lacks accountability and oversight mechanisms might worsen the problem rather than solving it.

Dealing with groups labelled as 'terrorists'

So far, the discussion about DDR in Mali has primarily focused on signatory and compliant armed groups. Other non-state armed groups falling under the label 'terrorist' or 'jihadist', the so-called terrorist armed groups, are not captured by the DDR framework as outlined in the Algiers agreement.

The fact that the discourse in Mali distinguishes between 'jihadist' and 'non-jihadist' groups is quite misleading though, as conflict lines at times overlap, and the differentiation between 'jihadist' and 'non-jihadist' groups (signatory and compliant) is not always so clear cut as presented. "Fighters often pass back and forth between all types of groups, based on geography or local circumstances. This fluidity has led to frequent allegations that both pro-government and formerly separatist or non-jihadist armed groups have collaborated with various jihadist groups" (Lebovich, 2019).

Despite this fluidity, the instruments dealing with the various armed groups follow well-known pathways: The 'signatory' and 'compliant' armed groups can take part in the DDR process as outlined above. In contrast, the handling and treatment of individuals previously associated with what is considered a 'terrorist' organisation are not included in the category of DDR and instead follow prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration requirements.

In the latter context and as part of counter-terrorism activities, many individuals in Mali have been arrested and accused of terrorism-related charges in the past years (ICCT/UNICRI, 2017). To the knowledge of the author, the Malian government has not yet developed a structured approach for the risk assessment and screening of individuals connected to violent extremism. Civil society actors close to this process are at least reporting that individuals regarded as ‘violent extremists’ in custody of the authorities are still “put into the same box”. Plans to look into the categorisation of these individuals are, however, underway. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has also developed a national strategy for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) (2018-2020) and an action plan. Prevention activities are ongoing and supported by international actors such as MINUSMA as well as civil society.

These activities aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism are independent of the DDR process in Mali as outlined above. This is much in line with how it works in other similar conflict settings that involve groups that carry the label ‘terrorists’. What is, however, overlooked in this regard is the fluidity that has been mentioned earlier: The lines between armed groups, the so-called ‘jihadist’ and others, can become blurred due to changes in leadership, splintering and re-alignments. At times, there may be striking similarities between what one would call a ‘terrorist’ and a regular armed group member. Of course, these groups do have different ideologies, purposes and *modi operandi*, and there are different legal requirements and frameworks in place to deal with them. But when taking a closer look at the root causes that are driving people in Mali to join non-state armed groups in the first place, these may at times overlap for those individuals termed ‘terrorists’ and those who are part of a ‘non-jihadist’ group. The so-called ‘jihadist’ groups in Mali are said to have “attempted to attract new recruits by offering financial incentives to Malians, many of whom live in extreme poverty [...] [and] through capitalizing on ethnic and regional divisions within the country” (Counter Terrorism Project, 2019). The recruitment into armed

groups labelled as ‘terrorists’ is deeply entangled with the lack of governance, state repression, the split of the country into three parts (the north, the centre and the south), the war economy and the lack of livelihood options and the social opportunities that they enable (e.g. marriage).

Debates over grievances would obviously require direct communication also with ‘jihadist’ actors (such as Katiba Macina) in Mali. Claims to negotiate with them “potentially aiming first for local ceasefires and other means of mitigating civilian suffering before broadening the scope” (International Crisis Group, 2019) have thus become louder but have so far remained unanswered by the Malian government.

Conclusion

Instead of putting non-state armed groups in Mali into boxes, thereby limiting the ‘tools’ that can be used to address them, it makes sense to take legitimate claims of socio-political marginalisation and calls for improved governance in Mali more seriously— independent of the ideological motivation a group has. Addressing grievances of non-state armed actors in Mali is nothing that a DDR programme can deal with on its own, but this is an area that the Malian government will need to invest more resources in and open the debate up to. If this is not taken into account, any DDR programme will be anything else but sustainable.

Such a call to better address the grievances of armed non-state actors in Mali is certainly not new. Previous research, also into individual trajectories to violent extremism in Mali, has already provided evidence “that a lack of trust in state and security forces, plus injustice, self-protection and economic hardship are the primary drivers of people’s readiness to take up arms” (International Alert, 2016) and that it is necessary to look beyond the label of terrorism in Mali. But somehow, this call has not reached the policy level which is still much influenced by counter-terrorist terminology.

It is, therefore, necessary to reframe the discourse about Mali. The narrative of 'bringing terrorists to justice' feeds into the stigmatisation of members of these groups and hence leaves limited room for manoeuvre in dealing with them. The discourse will need to shift from fighting terrorism to broader multi-dimensional peacebuilding. Part and parcel of this is to move away from the narrow programmatic focus on P/CVE and 'fighting the terrorist' towards addressing the grievances of non-state armed groups at large.

To achieve this broader perspective, the linkages, existing and potential overlaps between DDR and P/CVE including their connections and synergies with the overall peace process need to be better understood. At the time of writing, DDR and P/CVE are regarded as separate processes, yet there are direct linkages between these two approaches of dealing with non-state armed violence. What is required is a strategy that takes into account these various programmatic elements and which at the same time provides an overarching-long term vision how to address non-state armed violence in Mali.

The wider DDR programme only makes sense if there is significant progress in forming the reconstituted MDSF and security sector reform. Without achievements in these areas, starting DDR might even be harmful, as integrated individuals will be unclear about their purpose, function and status within the MDSF. To build trust of the average Malian citizen in the state and its security organs, security sector assistance needs to have a stronger focus on making sure that members of the MDSF adhere to human rights, and on enhancing the capacity of the military justice system as well as strengthening the oversight role of civil society and parliament.

Moreover, DDR will also need to look beyond the existing peace agreement and address violence in the central region of Mali. In the absence of a DDR framework for armed groups in the centre, one potential

way forward is to conduct disarmament and violence reduction activities targeting the communities at large. To be meaningful and to have a sustainable impact, such measures would, however, need to be closely linked with other stabilisation and development efforts in that region.

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